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The Role of Mass Media

by
Mehra Masani

**LESLIE SAWHNY
PROGRAMME
OF
TRAINING
FOR DEMOCRACY**

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A society that wishes to progress must have a communication to match its aspirations. It must be free in its expression, accessible to all its citizens and as diversified as the community it serves. In a developing society it must also raise people's aspirations, teach them

new skills, supplement the resources of schools and universities and other institutions, and generally, create a climate for change and modernisation. But the media in India still reach only a small part of our population and, by the standards of developed societies none of them can be considered a mass media, though relatively radio and the press are mass media while TV aspires to be one quite soon.

It is one of the tragedies of under-developed countries that their under-development results in inadequate growth of the media of communication and this in turn retards their economic and social progress. It is a vicious circle from which there is no easy escape. The inadequacy of the present communication system is obvious. Of the minimum prescribed by UNESCO, for every thousand of the population, India has about a seventh of the press, and a fourth of the radio facilities. We are well behind other developing societies as the following table will show :

UNESCO Minimum per 1000 people	Newspaper copies 100	Radio Sets 50
India	15	22
Sri Lanka	49	63
Indonesia	7	114
South Korea	66	126
Singapore	201	49
Thailand	21	78
Afghanistan	6	—
Pakistan	6	14

Even so these inadequate facilities are confined to the cities and the facilities for the rural areas are even scantier ; yet it is in these areas that information and education are required. When one goes further into the tribal areas or to border regions the position is worse still. Who should be responsible for the development of the media ?

In most of the advanced countries the development of communication was not usually undertaken by the Government. The press, radio and television were all developed by private initiative and enterprise, though in the case of radio and TV varying degrees and forms of social control have been universal. The expansion of all the media depended entirely on the demand for them. Newspapers increased in number and circulation according to their capacity to induce readers to read them and industry and trade to use them for advertising. Radio and TV also developed according to their appeal to listeners and viewers ; this applied both to those systems financed by licence fees and those financed by advertising. The State either played no part at all in these developments or, in the case of radio and TV, exercised an indirect supervisory function to ensure that certain technical and other regulations were observed. In India, however, the position has been rather different.

The Press

The press in India has grown on the same basis as in the advanced countries of the West, that is on readership and advertising, but with a circulation of fifteen newspapers for a thousand people it obviously reaches only a small minority. As it is the educated and articulate minority, the press is still the most powerful

opinion making agency in India. Unless newspaper readership increases rapidly the press cannot be accessible to all our citizens. Some of them have access only to radio and others to no medium at all.

Even the small circulation of our daily papers is very unevenly distributed. Half the total sales are in the four metropolitan cities ; 93 per cent of the sales are to 10 per cent of the population who live in towns. Though 80 per cent of all publications, including weeklies, are in Indian languages, there is great variation between them. Malayalam, Marathi, Gujarati and Tamil are well developed but Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, and others are below the all India average. It must also be noted that the total circulation of periodicals and newspapers in English exceeds that in any one Indian language.

Among the papers that go to make up the circulation figures are several which struggle for survival and depend on outside agencies for support. It is not profitable in India to start a local paper in a small town or in a rural community because the demand is very small and advertisements would not be forthcoming. Government cannot do anything about this, only wider education will bring about a change, but Government exerts a negative influence through its newsprint import policy, the taxation policy with regard to advertising, and not the least, the pressure exercised by the advertising policies of the Central and State Governments. Several small newspapers are kept alive by Government advertisements. As they are not financially independent they cannot be politically independent, nor can they fulfil the function of representing the people's views. With the cost of production as high as it is because of the need to import machinery, ink, paper, and so forth, it is un-

likely that such papers will become efficient and self-supporting.

Some of the bigger papers, both in English and in the Indian languages compare well with papers elsewhere and, if allowed to grow without restriction, would play a more effective part in our public life but the Government regards as "big", papers with a circulation of 50,000 and discriminates against them in various ways. For example only 15 per cent of the machinery imports are allowed to the "big" papers, while the small get 50 per cent and the medium get 35 per cent. Of course no one has bothered to find out whether such restrictions on the bigger papers help the smaller ones.

Barring a few exceptions most Indian papers suffer from certain weaknesses which retard their growth and reduce their influence. They are obsessed with politicians and neglect to report and comment on social changes, especially those in the rural areas. They mostly lack enterprise, and creative journalism is very rare. Their staff is untrained and yet there are no training schemes worth the name. The level of technological advance is much lower than for Indian industry as a whole because of inadequate investment. When the press takes up a case of corruption or inefficiency it is generally ineffective because there is no sustained campaign. A single article or editorial comment is hardly enough. The Indian language papers copy the English instead of selecting news and editing and explaining it for a less educated clientele.

But none of the difficulties of the Indian press are insurmountable provided the Government gives up its ambivalent attitude to the freedom of the press. Many years ago Pandit Nehru said in Parliament : "I would

rather have a completely free press, with all the dangers involved in the wrong use of that freedom than a regulated press." Alas, the climate has changed since then and the freedom of the press is constantly threatened by administrative and political policies and action. In fear of adverse reactions in democratic societies the Government is unable to 'nationalise' the press but at the same time it is intolerant of press criticism of its policies and actions. It argues that in a developing society the people's faith in their Government and their society must be maintained and should not be undermined by criticism of corruption, inefficiency, ideological confusion, and so forth. When politicians and officials argue that criticism threatens the security of the State they are in fact worrying about the security of their personal power.

Press censorship must be resisted in all societies but in developing societies there are additional reasons for doing so. Firstly, where there is no criticism the stability of society is that of stagnation. Secondly, if things cannot be improved by free discussion there will be change by violence. Thirdly, a free press, critical of the Government, is the only means by which the public mood and public opinion can be assessed by the Government if the other media are owned and controlled by it.

Diffusion of ownership to deprive business interests the control of the press may be a good thing provided that there is a clear identification of professional and moral responsibility which we have in a single known publisher, owner or editor who is accountable to the public and to his profession. The cry for Workers' control of newspapers assumes that a paper's first duty is to its staff. This is incorrect ; it is to its readers.

With the new technologies which make for cheaper printing, small community journals are now possible. These would open up avenues for the expression of diverse views unrelated to the interests of 'big business.' Freedom of the press means diversity of the press and it should be our aim to diversify the ownership of the press, not to restrict it.

Radio and Television

Government control is absolute as no licence is issued to any individual or institution to operate a broadcasting service. Even the State governments are not permitted to do so though at one time broadcasting was a State subject. All India Radio functions as a department of the Government of India, subject to all the rules and regulations of Government offices not only in its procedures, but also in its staffing pattern and in every other respect, and is financed by grants from the Treasury.

In recent months the Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting has stated several times that 90 per cent of the people of India are not served by radio. Of the 12 million licenced receivers in the country only $1\frac{1}{2}$ million are in the rural areas. These, and approximately 90,000 community receivers serve our entire rural population of almost 450,000,000 people !

In terms of area coverage AIR still cannot be heard on medium wave in 30 per cent of the country's area. Even in areas covered by AIR, large linguistic minorities have no programmes because most stations have only one channel which broadcasts in the language of the majority.

Television is confined to four centres ; Delhi, Bombay, Srinagar and Amritsar. Calcutta, Madras, and other cities will have TV in the next few years. The total number of licences in force as on 1-10-1973 is approximately 1,15,000. The number will increase with the opening of new stations but considering the cost of the TV set and the cost of establishing TV centres and extending the service beyond the big cities, the development of TV will be very slow. The only possibility of using TV as a medium of communication with the masses is to develop it for community viewing in the towns and villages. Since the extension of the service to cover the country would be not only slow but very expensive, the Government is now considering the possibility of transmission through a communication satellite. The National Aeronautic and Space Administration of the USA has offered India a satellite on loan for one year for the Satellite Instructional TV Experiment (SITE). This will commence in 1975. The intention was to watch and evaluate the results of the experimental programmes on agricultural productivity, on family planning, on primary school teaching, and on rural uplift in general. For the experiment approximately 5000 TV receivers are being provided to selected villages spread over the country. Even if each receiver serves 200 people, at different times of the day, a million will be affected. But there are many problems ; the main question is whether the programmes which will be planned and broadcast by AIR, with the assistance of other concerned agencies, will be appropriate and effective.

Without waiting for the results of the experiment to be evaluated, the Indian Space Research Organisation is proposing to launch an Indian satellite by 1976. It

would instal receivers in about 100,000 villages to receive the programmes. If this proposal is accepted about 20,000,000 people in rural areas will be exposed to TV. At that stage TV could be considered a mass medium. The cost of the project is approximately Rs. 500 crores. Whether such a large investment will be approved by the Government and whether the benefit will be commensurate with the cost is anybody's guess.

If the newspapers suffer from Government's restrictive policies and from their own managerial and editorial weaknesses, radio and TV are also hamstrung by Government's monopolistic and rigid control. The adverse effects of Government's stewardship of these media have been detailed over and over again. For want of space I can only mention briefly the main points of criticism.

Firstly, after 35 years of broadcasting, there are still millions of people not served by radio or TV as mentioned earlier. Government has not invested sufficient resources in these media in spite of acknowledging that they could play an important role in the development of the country. Wasteful Government policies and procedures aggravate the problem of inadequate investment.

Secondly, in the absence of regular and systematic audience research AIR is unaware of the needs and tastes of listeners. Programmes are broadcast for which there are no listeners while neglecting those which listeners want.

Thirdly, AIR has not succeeded in recruiting the right type of staff. The quality of a broadcasting service depends on dynamic and imaginative leadership on the one hand and on the capacity and independence

of the junior staff on the other. Their wages, prestige and morale are too low to attract the right people.

Finally, the most frequently and forcefully expressed criticism is that the news and comment on controversial issues is biased in favour of the Government. Numerous instances have been cited in Parliament, and in the press, of the preponderance of news of Government activities and the views of Government spokesmen, and the denial of opportunity for the expression of views opposed to those of the Establishment. Thus AIR has come to be regarded as the voice of the Government and its credibility has been undermined. The Government deliberately creates a confusion between the State and the Government, between the Constitution and the policies of the ruling party. Thus any criticism of the Government and its policies is dubbed subservise. Governments are transitory ; the State is above Party. A Government may be influenced by party interest but the State must act only in the public interest. If broadcasting is a State monopoly it must be used in the public interest. In a democratic society radio and TV must support the broad national objectives of the State. It is not their function to support the Government of the day or to champion the views of the Establishment. Their function is rather to probe, report and analyse what underlies a controversy to allow the public to make its own judgment. The failure on the part of the Government to realise that the public has a right to know the truth is the result of an incomplete commitment to democracy and to freedom of information.

It is obvious that Government's role in the development of radio and TV has been ineffective, to say the

least, while its handling of the press has retarded the growth of sound journalism and threatens to curb its freedom. What can we do about it?

- Autonomy

As far as the press is concerned public opinion must be mobilised to support the unfettered existence of newspapers—'big' and small—which have the financial and professional independence to express views which may not be palatable to the Establishment. So much has already been said on this subject that further comment is superfluous.

In the case of broadcasting it is worthwhile to explore the possibilities of different forms of organisation which may be more efficient and productive. Several suggestions have been put forward to improve the working of AIR ; some of these are contained in the Report of the Committee on Broadcasting and Information Media (1967). The Chanda Committee, as it is usually known, examined several possibilities and recommended the establishment of two independent autonomous Corporations financed partly from licence revenue, partly from advertising revenue, derived from a limited sale of advertising time, and partly from Government funds made available for specific nation-building, educational programmes. It was the Committee's view that this type of organisation would remove the present deficiencies. Autonomous corporations would not be obliged to carry Government propaganda and their informative and educational programmes would thus carry greater conviction. Freedom from the rigid administrative procedures and rules of Government would permit greater flexibility in budgeting and allow

for a more rapid and rational programme of expansion. A radical change in the staffing pattern would be possible, taking account of the need for creative talent in broadcasting. It is clear from all the evidence available that creative artists are not inclined to work for Government in radio and TV under the present conditions and unless these are improved it is unlikely that the requisite expert skills and talents will be available to make the media effective for mass communication. Only such personnel as can inspire confidence in the public and in the creative workers who man the various units should occupy positions of leadership in these media. The present recruitment policies and service conditions, the absence of training and opportunities for specialisation, the promotion policy, all result in the manning of senior directional posts by routine type officials who are not necessarily suitable to provide the dynamic leadership required for the development of broadcasting. Government officials are by nature security minded and unwilling to take the risks and show the enterprise which are essential in radio and TV.

We have excellent models to copy and adapt to our needs in some of the broadcasting corporations of the world. Even if in our conditions the autonomy of such corporations is more theoretical than real it is felt by the staff of AIR, by the press, and sections of the public that an autonomous body would be better than the present structure and could not possibly be worse.

Unfortunately, all the statements made in recent years by the prime minister and by successive ministers of state for information and broadcasting indicate that the Government has no intention of relaxing its control

over broadcasting despite the widespread demand for it. Various unconvincing arguments are advanced in support of Government's stand but, in fact, it is plain that the real reason is to use radio and TV as publicity and propaganda media for Government's policies and activities. In this as in many other matters our Government has chosen to follow the totalitarian rather than the democratic model. As the conversion of AIR into an autonomous corporation is one of the essentials of developing broadcasting as a medium of mass communication and a channel for the free flow of information it would be worth while to examine briefly the arguments advanced against the change by politicians and officials of the Establishment, so that such arguments can be met effectively wherever the issue is discussed.

The first and most frequently given reason for keeping AIR a department of the Government is that its earnings from licences and commercial advertising are sufficient only for its recurring expenditure and cannot pay for the expansion and development of broadcasting. The Chanda Committee had met this point by suggesting that just as Government, through the University Grants Commission, gives funds to Universities, which are autonomous bodies, it can give AIR funds to fulfil its obligations to provide educational and instructive programmes. Moreover, several public corporations and companies have been formed with a large investment of public funds for purposes considered beneficial to the community. Once an autonomous corporation is formed it can even raise loans to finance its development.

The second argument is based on the presumption that an autonomous body would be prey to commercial influences and would neglect its educative functions,

while giving all its attention to trivial, popular entertainment. There is nothing in the record of autonomous broadcasting organisations anywhere in the world to warrant any such misgivings. The BBC, the NHK (of Japan) and other such bodies provide excellent educational programmes, far superior to anything AIR has ever done in all its years of working under direct Government control.

Thirdly, members of Parliament are told that their control over AIR would be lost if it were an autonomous body. Unfortunately our MPs appear to have fallen for this argument without stopping to consider what precisely is the nature of the control they exercise at present. Apart from interpellations on trivial matters and an annual debate on the budget demands, Parliament exercises no control whatever. Through serious discussions in the Committee on Public Undertakings, it could exercise far more effective control.

Fourthly, it has been said that without the direct supervision of Government, the broadcasting authority may not function in the interest of the security and integrity of the State—as if the broadcasting authorities of Japan, Italy, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries, to mention only a few, act against the security and welfare of the State ! Autonomous bodies have always functioned in the interest of the societies they serve but often they have considered such interest to be in opposition to the interest of the ruling party and have rightly upheld the former to the annoyance of the latter.

Finally, it is said that an autonomous body would not be any more independent than a department of the Government because the directors of the Board appointed by Government would be so selected as to carry out

Government's orders and anticipate its wishes. This point can be met if the Board is appointed by the President and not by the Prime Minister or Cabinet but, apart from that, it is obvious that if the Government forms an autonomous body with the intention of undermining its independence and autonomy, there is nothing to be gained by the change. One would not expect this of a government which is genuinely interested in promoting and strengthening democratic institutions. That this argument should be used by members of the Congress party and by senior officials only confirms the suspicion that the party has no intention of allowing AIR to act as a trustee for the national interest.

Competition

The citizen has a choice of news-papers but none in radio and TV programmes.

Allied to the question of autonomy is that of competition. It is hardly necessary to argue why AIR's monopoly of broadcasting should be challenged. Monopoly is bad for the public interest and for broadcasting itself. The radio, particularly in a country with a very low literacy rate, is far more potent than the printed word and the monopoly of broadcasting can be far more dangerous than the monopoly, real or imaginary, of the press. The size and variety of AIR's functions gives far too much power to the bureaucracy who control it. They can choose what the listener should hear or see and exclude what they dislike. It is not so much a matter of any dictator using these media as Hitler or Stalin did, but the subtle influence radio and TV can exert on the thinking of even educated and intelligent citizens, inducing an uncritical acceptance of the Govern-

ment's actions and policies, may well lead to an uniformity of society and pave the way for totalitarianism. The only safeguard of liberty lies in diversity. The freedom of the press means nothing without the diversity of the press. If, when printing was invented, it had been entrusted to a statutory monopoly, there would have been no democracy as we understand it today.

But broadcasting is expensive and all countries cannot afford the luxury of several competing networks such as are found in the richer countries. Poor societies committed to democracy, have therefore to be content with a single autonomous body. But in no democratic society is there a State owned monopoly for broadcasting, as we have in India. Once we succeed in taking away the control of broadcasting from the Government and vest it in an autonomous body, the question of competition can be taken up because even an independent organisation should not have the monopoly of broadcasting. Such competition can be provided, to some extent, by establishing separate corporations for radio and TV, or the competition can come from local radio and TV stations, independent of the all India network. It has been considered by many experts that India needs hundreds of small, low-power radio stations serving the local needs of limited areas. AIR's rural programmes for example, which are broadcast from centres far removed from the scene of agricultural activity, have not been effective because they ignore the needs of the farmers of a particular region. Moreover, local radio stations can draw on local talent for entertainment, for discussion of local affairs, and so forth. Such talent has no access at present to AIR studios. If, therefore, a University or a Municipality or a cultural organisation wishes to start a service, of limited range, to promote

local effort there is no reason why it should not be allowed to do so if it can find the resources. There would have to be a co-ordinating body on the lines of the Federal Communications Commission of the USA for the allocation of frequencies and for ensuring compliance with certain standards of broadcasting. Local stations may wish to accept advertisements to pay their way and there should be no objection to that either, provided there is some control over the nature and extent of advertising. Vividh Bharati has a code for advertisers which can be applied to the private stations.

From such small beginnings it is possible that a competitive network of stations may be organised but the main purpose of allowing private radio stations should not be to build up a rival network but to provide opportunities for the expression of different views and scope for local talent which a national body is likely to ignore. At the same time such stations would provide the competition which AIR so badly needs.

The cost of TV is so high that it would be impossible for any private or non-official body to set up a station unless it was financed by earnings from advertisements. There is, at present, considerable agitation over the expenditure of public funds for the TV service provided by AIR for the urban rich in Delhi, Bombay, and other cities. It is argued, quite correctly, that the rich can afford to pay for their entertainment, and a TV service financed from public revenues must be for the people in towns and villages who cannot afford to buy TV sets. Community viewing sets must be installed as widely as possible to bring TV to the masses. No provision is made for such a supply, even on a restricted scale, in the budgets drawn up by AIR for its TV stations.

But if the public service is for the masses there is no reason why the urban middle and upper class viewer should be denied entertainment through TV. Private stations should be permitted to cater for them, financed in one or other of the several ways in which such stations are financed elsewhere. They can be commercial stations, subsisting on advertising, or they can provide "Pay TV," a system by which the viewer pays for the programmes he views. These are registered on a meter attached to his set, rather like a gas or electricity meter. Cable TV is becoming popular in the West and is also based on the viewer paying a subscription for the service he receives. If such stations are permitted to operate, the public service can forget about entertaining the rich and get on with its job of communicating with the masses.

A National Council for Mass Communication

How can we bring about the organisational changes discussed above? Unless Government is made to accept the position that communication must not be for the purpose of obtaining short-term and doubtful propaganda advantages it would not be possible to make any of the changes which are necessary for improvement. But it is not enough to make a demand for autonomy for AIR. The demand must be backed by a sustained campaign by political parties, in Parliament and outside, by the press and by academic, intellectual and cultural groups and institutions. Political parties have been remiss in protesting against AIR's policies only when their own interests were affected.

It is necessary now to consider the establishment of a forum for the discussion of all issues affecting the freedom and growth of the media of communication, and to

formulate a communications policy. It is the absence of such a policy that has led to the haphazard growth of the media. The Chanda Committee had recommended a National Council for Mass Communication. Rather belatedly the Government announced earlier this year its acceptance of this suggestion but we have not yet heard of any move to appoint such a body. What kind of Council should it be? The first essential is that it must be autonomous and not an appendage of the Government. Its decisions must be binding on the Government as it would have representatives of the Government on it. All the departments of the Union Government which are concerned with communication, such as the Ministries of Agriculture, Health and family Planning, Education, Information and Broadcasting, the Planning Commission, the Indian Space Research Organisation, All India Radio, and others would be suitably represented on the Council. The State Governments must also participate in its work as the content of radio and TV programmes of an educational nature must be co-ordinated with the work of the departments of State governments.

There should of course be representatives of the press, of the film industry and the Films Division of the Government of India, of advertising, of publishing, of manufacturers of equipment and material, such as radio and TV sets, printing machinery and newsprint, film and photographic materials and so forth. Intellectuals, artists, and academicians must also find a place.

What should be the ingredients of a Communications policy? The establishment of priorities with regard to technical innovation, including the licensing of manufacture of equipment ; co-ordination between the

media to arrive at a balance system ; co-ordination between the media and other agencies responsible for development ; manpower planning and training ; evaluation of the performance of the media. Such evaluation must be by expert public institutions and not by the executive, or the bureaucracy or even a large, heterogeneous body like Parliament.

The force of public opinion, expressed through a Council of this nature and through other channels *can* bring about the desired changes to ensure the growth of the media and the freedom of information appropriate to one of the world's biggest democracies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mehra Masani retired recently as Deputy Director General of All India Radio after serving the department for over thirty years in several capacities. She has represented AIR at several international conferences, and was elected in 1973 as a Trustee of the International Broadcast Institute.

She is currently writing a book on problems of broadcasting in India.

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Published by Arvind A. Deshpande for the Leslie Sawhny Programme of Training for Democracy, Orient House, Mangalore Street, Ballard Estate, Bombay 1 and printed by F. Wiesinger at the Examiner Press, Dalal Street, Bombay.1

